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The Child's Right to Play

IPA USA 2026 White Paper

USA IPA

American Association for the Child's Right to Play

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Executive Summaries

Executive Summaries are organized by category, followed by author.

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It's a Child's Right

Play is not a privilege to be earned or a reward for good behavior. It is every child's fundamental right. The articles in this category explore how families, schools, communities, and organizations can help ensure that all children have meaningful opportunities to play, regardless of age, ability, or circumstance. From protecting recess and expanding opportunities for adventure and outdoor play to advancing inclusion, accessibility, and the voices of disabled and neurodivergent children, these authors highlight many ways to support and strengthen the right to play. They also offer practical advocacy strategies to help parents, educators, and community leaders create environments where joy, choice, belonging, and play are recognized as essential elements of childhood.

Authors

Recess and the Value of Choice in the School Environment

Charlene Woodham Brickman, PhD

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Recess and the Value of Choice in the School Environment

Charlene Woodham Brickman, PhD

Introduction

Today's Kindergarten through Grade 5 environment is not as "elementary" as one might think. In the current culture of high-stakes assessment, the buzzwords of the day are rigor and academic expectations. These expectations are often explicitly stated, highly scripted, and generally not developmentally aligned for their intended audience. To achieve these lofty academic goals, behavioral expectations are often out of step with students' chronological and developmental ages, creating an unrealistic bar and an ultra-serious atmosphere for children who should be participating in recess, collaborating with peers, learning through play, and experiencing joy in learning.

Conclusion

Our children need more than silence in the hallways and multiple-choice assessments. Our children are preparing for challenges that will require more than compliance. Students can acquire literacy and numeracy without losing their personhood. In the 21st Century, collaboration and creativity, initiative, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills are needed for success in life and the workplace. It is time to recognize that the current schoolification has never been the solution. Change is needed; educators and parents should no longer passively comply with the harmful practices children are experiencing in primary classrooms.

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Adolescents Need Adventure Too: Making Room for Play in Year 7

Educated by Nature

Daniel Burton, BEd & Isaac Wetherley, BS

Executive Summary

At Guildford Grammar School in Western Australia, Year 7 students step into a space of reclaimed timber, pallets, rope, paint, tools and natural features. They build and rebuild, create social worlds, take things apart, test ideas, rest together and leave traces of themselves in the landscape. The Year 7 Self Build Play Space offers a window into a form of childhood that can become difficult to see once students enter secondary school.

This paper explores the continuing right to play through adolescence. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to every child under 18. The Committee's guidance recognises that older children increasingly seek peer connection, independence, challenge, risk, identity and belonging through play and recreation. Recent guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics also calls for daily, quality recess across kindergarten to Grade 12.

The Guildford experience suggests that time is one part of a wider picture. Adolescents also need spaces they can influence, materials that respond to their ideas, acceptance of age-appropriate play, and adults who can observe before acting. Published research on risky play offers a useful lens for understanding challenge and self-assessment, while its strong focus on younger children asks us to apply it to adolescence with care.

The paper recommends that secondary schools protect regular break time, involve young people in shaping play provision, create varied and adaptable environments, use risk-benefit thinking, review practical barriers, and prepare adults to hold play with attention, proximity and trust.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Guildford Grammar School experience has helped us see adolescence as a continuation of childhood with its own forms of play. Year 7 students may carry greater

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physical capacity, sharper social awareness and a strong desire for independence. They also continue to imagine, make, test, retreat, laugh, take risks and build worlds together.

Their right to play is lived through relationships. It is shaped by the time schools protect, the places they make available, the types of materials they value and provide, the clothing students wear, the way adults interpret behaviour and the degree to which young people can influence decisions. A well-held play space combines freedom and care. Adults remain responsible, while young people experience real agency.

Secondary schools can begin with the following actions:

1. **Recognise adolescents as children with a continuing right to play.** Include Article 31 in whole-school conversations about wellbeing, break time, student voice and the design of the school day.
2. **Protect regular and meaningful break time.** Offer time free from academic demands, with opportunities for rest, friendship, movement, imagination and self-directed activity.
3. **Create varied and adaptable places.** Provide spaces for active, social, constructive, sensory, imaginative and quiet play, including materials young people can move and transform.
4. **Listen to young people and share ownership.** Invite students to shape the uses, agreements, materials and future development of their play spaces, and give their views genuine weight.
5. **Use risk-benefit thinking.** Remove unreasonable hazards while preserving age-appropriate challenge, uncertainty and opportunities to practise judgement.
6. **Prepare adults to notice before responding.** Build shared language around play, behaviour, energy, risk, proximity and care so staff can step closer or further away with intention.
7. **Review practical barriers to participation.** Consider uniform, footwear, storage, mess, maintenance, accessibility, gender and cultural safety as part of play provision.

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8. **Make play part of the culture.** Repeated access allows relationships, confidence, skills, shared memory and belonging to grow.

Adolescents need adventure too. Our hope is that secondary schools will remain curious about what play looks like as children grow, and willing to create conditions where it can remain visible, accepted and alive.

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Unheard Voices, Unseen Play: Addressing the Research Silence Around Disabled and Neurodivergent Children's Perspectives on Play

Sarah Jayne Meyer, MSc

Introduction

Disabled and neurodivergent children have a fundamental right to play and to participate in decisions that shape their lives, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Despite legal commitments, including Scotland's incorporation of the UNCRC, these rights are not consistently upheld. Many disabled and neurodivergent children continue to encounter significant barriers to free, outdoor, and adventurous play, and their perspectives remain largely absent from the research that informs policy and practice.

A growing body of evidence highlights a persistent gap between rights and lived experience. Research demonstrates the developmental importance of play, yet structural and attitudinal barriers continue to restrict disabled and neurodivergent children's access to meaningful play opportunities. At the same time, methodological limitations within research frequently silence their voices, relying instead on adult proxies or approaches that fail to accommodate diverse communication needs. Inclusive, adaptive, and child-centred research methods are essential for capturing the authentic experiences of disabled and neurodivergent children and for ensuring that their insights shape the environments and policies that affect them.

Strengthening children's rights requires coordinated action from researchers, educators, policymakers, and organisations. Ensuring that disabled and neurodivergent children are heard, directly, respectfully, and on their own terms, is both a legal obligation and a necessary step toward creating equitable, inclusive spaces for play and participation.

Play is a universal and essential part of childhood. It supports physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, and it is recognised as a fundamental right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989). Three articles are particularly relevant when considering disabled and neurodivergent

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children's participation in play research. Article 31 recognises the right of every child to rest, leisure, and play appropriate to their age. Article 23 affirms that a child with a disability has the right to live a full and decent life with dignity, independence, and active participation in their community. Article 12 states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings, and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have those views taken seriously.

Despite these protections, disabled and neurodivergent children often experience restricted access to play and limited opportunities to participate in research about their own lives.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Ensuring that disabled and neurodivergent children are meaningfully included in play research requires a coordinated commitment across research, education, and policy. The evidence presented demonstrates that exclusion is rarely the result of children's abilities and far more often a consequence of structural, methodological, and attitudinal barriers. Addressing these barriers demands a shift toward research practices that are flexible, reflexive, and grounded in children's rights.

Researchers must adopt approaches that recognise the diversity of children's communication styles and lived experiences. This includes developing multi-modal, child-centred methodologies that allow children to express themselves in ways that feel natural and accessible to them. A robust methodological "toolbox" should incorporate visual, sensory and alternative communication systems, ensuring that participation is not limited to those who can engage verbally or in writing. Researchers also need to cultivate a reflexive stance, one that acknowledges the power dynamics inherent in research and remains open to following children's priorities, even when they diverge from initial research plans. Silence, hesitation, and non-verbal communication must be treated as meaningful data rather than absence, and researchers should be prepared to invest the time and interpretive care required to understand these forms of expression.

Schools and educators also play a critical role in ensuring that all children, not only those who are compliant, confident, or easy to engage, are offered opportunities to participate in research. This includes actively challenging cultures that reward "good

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behaviour" with participation and inadvertently silence children who are dysregulated, anxious, or misunderstood.

Policymakers, too, have a responsibility to embed all children's voices within the systems that shape their lives. This involves funding accessible play spaces, supporting inclusive research initiatives, and ensuring that policy development processes actively seek out and respond to the perspectives of disabled and neurodivergent children. Compliance with UNCRC Articles 12, 23, and 31 must be monitored and applied in practice, not simply acknowledged in principle.

Ultimately, the inclusion of disabled and neurodivergent children in play research is not a methodological preference but a rights-based imperative. When children's voices are excluded, whether through inaccessible methods, adult assumptions, or structural barriers, the resulting policies and practices fail to reflect their lived realities. By committing to inclusive, adaptive, and ethically grounded research practices, we can begin to close the gap between rights and reality. Listening to disabled and neurodivergent children directly, respectfully, and on their own terms is essential for creating environments in which every child can play, participate, and thrive.

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The Power of Outdoor Play Partnerships for Inclusion and Accessibility

Angela Rekers, PhD

Introduction

Playing outdoors across a variety of terrains has been shown to contribute to children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development and well-being (Fyfe-Johnson et al., 2021; Schutte et al., 2017). While research clearly shows the benefits of outdoor play across a variety of terrains, children also have fewer opportunities for outdoor physical activity (WHO, 2019). This trend is wide-ranging, affecting children of all ages and abilities across all demographics.

Contributing to these trends are increasingly sedentary lifestyles and adults' concerns about safety that are limiting opportunities for outdoor play (Gray et al., 2015); even in educational settings, children and young people (CYP) are afforded fewer opportunities to move, play, and explore (Jerebine et al., 2022). Affordances for independent and/or risky play are likely to be especially constrained for young people and children with additional needs (Gately et. al., 2023). Given the well-documented research on the multiple holistic benefits of such play, these constraints may contribute to developmental challenges across physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains.

This paper argues that collaboration and partnership among families, communities, not-for-profit organizations, playworkers, forest school leaders, schools, specialist therapists, and others can create intentional opportunities to promote and support outdoor play for children and young people, especially those with traditionally limited access. Specialist services typically include health-sciences therapists, such as occupational therapists. Introducing outdoor play specialists could benefit everyone. An outdoor play collaboration in Wales, United Kingdom (UK), is used here to demonstrate the benefits of a forest school program for youth with disabilities.

Conclusion

For children and young people with diverse abilities in particular, an interdisciplinary approach to outdoor play provision can provide multiple benefits, including an enhanced sense of competence and ability. Chawla and Heft (2002) argue

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that the physical and social affordances available to children contribute to their development of competencies. Because over 22 percent of occupational therapists (OTs) in the United States work in early intervention centers or schools (AOTA, 2023), multidisciplinary partnerships and collaborations are commonplace indoors. Expanding this provision outdoors may provide additional benefits for adults, children, and young people. Adding nature therapists, play workers, or forest school leaders would ensure that children and young people with additional needs who may not be able to access play opportunities without added support can engage with a wider range of outdoor affordances.

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How Parents Can Advocate for a Playful Childhood that Prioritize Joy

Linnea Westerlind, MSocSc

Introduction

Parents and caregivers, we are raising kids in a challenging era. With rapidly changing, addictive technologies competing for our children's time—and let's be honest, our own time, too—it's never been harder to ensure kids get enough physical activity and time outdoors.

The good news is that, despite modern challenges, kids are still wired to play because play is biological and instinctive. As parents and caregivers, we have opportunities in nearly all areas of our children's lives to influence their access to play.

We know play is essential to a healthy and happy childhood. By sharing strategies and ideas for cultivating a culture of play within our families and communities, we can advocate for a playful childhood that prioritizes joy.

Conclusion

Parents across the U.S. are advocating for systemic change in recess policies, youth sports oversight, and physical activity legislation. More than 20 U.S. states now have physical activity and recess laws in place, in many cases, thanks to advocacy from parents (*U.W. Sports Institute | Youth sports and physical activity legislation tracker*, n.d.). You can start at the local level by getting involved with your school's PTA and participating in its legislative advocacy committee. Find organizations in your region that are doing systems change work and get involved. Contact your state legislators and ask for a meeting; talk about what matters to you regarding play, even if you do not know the policy solution.

Parents *can* and *do* make a difference in bolstering play in their own child's life—and in creating societal changes that benefit all kids.

Recommended Reading for Parents and Caregivers

Crouse, K. (2018). *Norwich: One tiny Vermont town's secret to happiness and excellence*. Simon & Schuster.

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Hanscom, A. J. (2016). *Balanced and barefoot: How unrestricted outdoor play makes for strong, confident, and capable children*. New Harbinger Publications.

Hoffmeister, P. B. (2013). *Let them be eaten by bears: A Fearless Guide to Taking Our Kids Into the Great Outdoors*. Penguin.

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White Papers

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Recess and the Value of Choice in the School Environment

Charlene Woodham Brickman, PhD

Introduction

Today's Kindergarten through Grade 5 environment is not as "elementary" as one might think. In today's culture of high-stakes assessment, the buzzwords are rigor and academic expectations. These expectations are often explicitly stated, highly scripted, and generally not developmentally aligned for their intended audience. To meet these lofty academic goals, behavioral expectations often fall out of step with students' chronological and developmental ages, creating an unrealistic bar and an ultra-serious atmosphere for children who should be participating in recess, collaborating with peers, learning through play, and experiencing joy in learning.

Problem Statement

Historically, recess was the one guaranteed break in the school day. While recess should be an unstructured break of at least 20 minutes during the school day, outdoors when weather allows and indoors in inclement weather (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2006), in today's classroom, it is often used as classroom currency for both academic and behavioral consequences.

Recess is a student's right and must be protected (Jarrett & Waite-Stupiansky, 2009; Rhea, 2016); unfortunately, in many of our educational settings, it is used to control and discipline students. Recess deprivation deprives a child of the movement, socialization, and breaks needed during an otherwise overly structured day (Murray & Ramstetter, 2013). More broadly, the deprivation of play and/or recess negates a child's fundamental right to play, which is essential to the well-being of the "whole child" (Zosh et al., 2022).

Other obvious control scenarios include assigned seating and hallway transitions where students are required to line up in number order, place an invisible "bubble" in their mouths, or place their hands behind their backs in a "ducktail" position. All while keeping themselves to the right side of the hallway in a resemblance of "prison" (Adair & Colegrove, 2021). Where are they going? Are they going to lunch where they are

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required to sit in assigned seats away from a friend(s) and often, as a behavioral consequence, have to eat in silence (Hooser & McClain, 2023)? Are they going to a Special, where an adult directs them, and compliance is expected?

A larger part of the problem is that compliance is most often a conversation in schools serving children of color and/or from low-income backgrounds (Winn, 2018). These marginalized populations are often stereotyped as harboring behavioral issues or needing remedial interventions, with the antidote often packaged as Social-Emotional Learning curricula (Humphries et al., 2018), with little focus on the child as a whole person but an increased focus on simple compliance.

Any of these elements of control restricts a child's ability to make individual choices, learn self-control, and have agency over self. When multiple layers of this control are the norm in our current educational settings, when is the appropriate time in the day for a child to express an opinion, extend a hypothesis, and/or make personal choices?

Background

Brooks and Murray (2016) raised concerns about the perceived epidemic of the shift toward prescribed curricula and the prioritization of academics over a child-centered pedagogy. The prioritization of academics is a developmentally *misplaced* approach (Ring & O'Sullivan, 2018) that drives a culture of compliance (Adair & Colegrove, 2021), in an attempt to strengthen literacy and math skills while negating other assets the child needs to acquire (Woodhead & Moss, 2007; Ring & O'Sullivan, 2018). This trend has been termed "schoolification" (Bassock et al., 2016) because it prioritizes a culture of compliance over engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This process denies both students and educators choice and can create a hostile environment for true learning. "Schoolification" emphasizes classroom compliance by removing agency from both students and educators, sacrificing intrinsic motivation and meaningful engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Classrooms of compliance may forfeit *meaningful experiences* that connect prior knowledge in many ways. In classrooms where compliance is not the goal, both teachers

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and students have choice, and promoting children's agency is critical to equitable, empowered learning (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019).

When policymakers, superintendents, principals, and teachers place undue emphasis on greater academic accountability for young children, it can actually negatively impact children's academic achievement and socioemotional development (Abry et al., 2015). The "push down" of academic expectations on young learners can have negative consequences for children's literacy development when the primary focus is on preparing them for standardized tests (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Appropriate Strategies

When schools prioritize student agency over compliance, children can draw on their culture, community, interests, and lived experiences as meaningful resources for learning. These choices help students develop empowered identities because they can explore ideas connected to their own interests and values, which can deepen engagement and support learning (Adair & Colegrove, 2021). When teachers understand children's interests and curiosities, they can use them to drive instruction and experiences. One such example is choosing classroom reading materials based on instructional interest rather than simply on the classroom average (or target) reading level (Adair & Colegrove, 2021).

Imagine the difference in children's confidence, self-esteem, attention, interest, motivation, and self-control if we incorporated the six learning principles, recognized as the foundation of how children learn. These six principles include classrooms that incorporate active, engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, and joyful learning (Blinkoff et al., 2023). Under these six learning principles, a*ctive learning experiences* far outweigh "sit and get" passive experiences. Further, *engaging* learning is not distracting; rather, it holds students' attention. The give-and-take of *socially interactive* learning is the opposite of solitary learning, and the give-and-take of iterative learning is the opposite of closed-ended learning, allowing room for mistakes and learning through trial and error. Lastly, a joyful classroom supports expression and learning (Zosh et al., 2022; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022).

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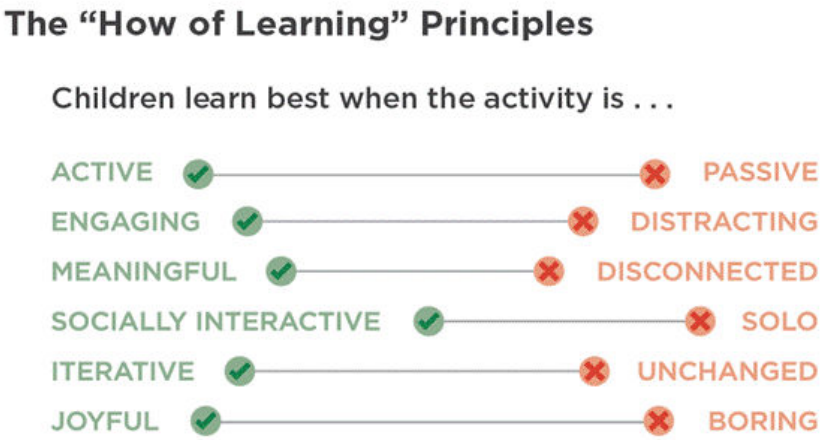

(Blinkoff et al., 2023)

In addition to the graphic above, research identifies the 6 Cs: collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence (Anggraeni, P., Sunendar, D., Maftuh, B., Sopandi, W., & Puspita, R. D., 2022). Rather than meeting isolated academic standards, this approach draws on research on what supports personal fulfillment (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022). One solution is to offer all students the chance to build transferable skills that support the diverse strengths needed to function in society.

Other strategies include beginning with students' prior learning, funds of knowledge, or background knowledge. This strategy can tap into resources that might otherwise go unused (Blinkoff et al., 2023). Viewing assessment more broadly than technology-based platforms allow builds a more comprehensive picture of your students' abilities and needs (Jones et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Our children need more than silence in the hallways and multiple-choice assessments. Our children are preparing for challenges that will require more than compliance. Students can acquire literacy and numeracy without losing their personhood. In the 21st Century, collaboration and creativity, initiative, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills are needed for success in life and the workplace. It is time to recognize that the current schoolification has never been the

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solution. Change is needed; educators and parents should no longer passively comply with the harmful practices children are experiencing in primary classrooms.

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Adolescents Need Adventure Too: Making Room for Play in Year 7 Educated by Nature

Daniel Burton, BEd & Isaac Wetherley, BS

Introduction

In a space between a two-storey classroom block and the basketball court, a group of Year 7 students began with pallets, timber offcuts, saws, hammers and power drills. Their structures took shape slowly, with a couch appearing first, then a kitchen, and later a double-storey house. Materials like old pallets and sticks were assigned new meanings, players' roles were negotiated, and tools moved from hand to hand. From a distance, the activity could have looked rough, noisy, and unfinished. From within the space, a shared domestic world and its community were emerging.

Some of these students were often noticed first when their energy rubbed against school expectations. Here, the same energy became construction, humour, cooperation and sociodramatic play. We found ourselves wondering what else becomes visible when adults pause long enough to look beneath the first impression. What needs might sit within the behaviour? What might the materials be inviting? What becomes possible when a young person feels trusted, capable and seen?

Year 7 is a threshold. For many Australian students, it marks the beginning of secondary school, with new timetables, teachers, uniforms, expectations and social worlds. Childhood continues through this transition, although the language surrounding it changes. Play is often renamed as sport, recreation, socialising, an extracurricular activity or a break. Each has value. The broader, self-directed forms of play that involve imagining, building, moving, tinkering, retreating, taking manageable risks and transforming a place can become harder to find.

The Year 7 Self-Build Play Space at Guildford Grammar School grew out of this wondering. Inspired by adventure playgrounds, junk playgrounds, loose-parts play and Playwork-informed practice, it offers a supervised environment where students use real tools, reclaimed materials and natural features to create their own play culture. The program has helped us notice that adolescents continue to seek adventure. They also

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seek places where they can gather, make, test, belong, and be alone. Their play has matured with them, and it remains part of childhood.

Problem Statement: When Play Becomes Harder to See

Many secondary schools provide courtyards, lawns, ovals, courts, verandas and benches. These places support conversation, rest, observation and friendship. Organised sport offers movement, shared purpose and belonging for many students. Alongside these valuable provisions, young people may have few places where they can alter the environment, invent its purpose, use loose materials, create a shelter, explore impact or follow an idea with no predetermined finish.

This narrowing is often unintentional. Secondary schools have complex responsibilities for safety, schedules, learning, maintenance, and supervision. Improvised structures can look untidy. Loud or physical play can be difficult to read. Tools, climbing, and deconstruction can activate adult concern. Formal uniforms can quietly limit kneeling, carrying, climbing, crawling, painting, or even sitting on the ground (let alone in a tree). Peer culture can also make young people wary of anything that appears 'childish'.

Digital play is part of many adolescents' social and creative lives. Many young people use online environments to alter and invent worlds, gather resources and explore. Physical, outdoor and material play belongs there too. A broad ecology of play allows young people to move between conversation and action, solitude and community, digital worlds and places they can touch and change.

We noticed playful impulses continuing through jokes, invented roles, roughness, collecting, making, private rituals and boundary-testing. These expressions were sometimes recognised as play only after we moved closer. A student striking a pallet may have been seeking impact, sound and physical release. A group gathering discarded objects may have been building a shop. A half-enclosed structure may have been a place for conversation, retreat, or belonging.

Break time carries particular weight in secondary school. The American Academy of Pediatrics' 2026 policy statement recommends daily, quality recess for students from

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kindergarten through Grade 12. It describes recess as a pause in academic effort and a setting for peer engagement, negotiation, emotional self-control, communication, and conflict resolution (Murray et al., 2026). For older students, a meaningful break can hold rest and social connection, self-directed activity and movement.

Background: A Right That Grows With the Child

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the right of every child to rest, leisure, play and recreation, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. The Convention generally defines a child as a person under 18, thereby placing adolescents clearly within its protection.

General Comment No. 17 explains how this right changes as children grow. Older children increasingly seek opportunities to socialise with peers, spend time alone, explore independence, and encounter progressively more challenge and risk. These experiences contribute to identity and belonging. The guidance also identifies academic pressure, heavily programmed schedules, restricted school play, loss of contact with nature, and adult intolerance of noisy or messy play as barriers to the right (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

Naomi Lott's framework for bringing the right to play into daily life identifies four interconnected conditions: space, time, acceptance, and a rights-informed approach (Lott, 2025). This helped us understand why an oval or a free lunchtime may still leave some play needs unmet. A young person can have time without a place that invites them, or a place without materials and agency. They can have both while sensing that their actual way of playing is unwelcome. Acceptance asks adults to value play as it appears, including forms that are loud, changeable, strange, or unfinished.

The language of permission can still place control in the hands of the adult who grants it. Acceptance begins from the understanding that the right already belongs to the child. Adults continue to carry responsibility for care, safety, and the rights of others. Their role includes creating conditions, removing unreasonable hazards, listening to young people and responding in ways that honour their evolving capacities.

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Challenge, Uncertainty and Judgment

Risky play research offers language for some of what we saw at Guildford. Sandseter (2007) described forms including height, speed, tools, dangerous elements, rough-and-tumble play and opportunities to move beyond adult sight. Kleppe et al. (2017) later proposed play with impact and vicarious risk in research with very young children. These categories were developed largely through early childhood research, so they are best used as descriptive lenses rather than direct evidence about adolescents.

The same caution applies to the review by Brussoni et al. (2015), which examined children aged three to twelve. It reported overall positive associations between risky outdoor play and several health indicators and behaviours, while rating the evidence from very low to moderate quality. Its distinction between risk and hazard remains useful. A risk is a challenge a child can perceive and weigh. A hazard is a source of harm the child is unlikely to recognise or manage.

The United Nations guidance speaks more directly to adolescents. It states that some degree of risk and challenge is integral to play and calls for a balance between reducing unacceptable hazards and equipping children to strengthen their own safety (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). At Guildford, this could be seen when a student tested a structure, reconsidered a brace, noticed a hot screw, or asked a peer to hold timber steady. Safety became a shared practice of awareness and judgment.

Appropriate Approaches and Strategies: Holding a Self Build Play Space

Begin with time, space, and acceptance

The Self Build Play Space depends on regular access. Repeated sessions allow students to return to an idea, deepen relationships, and see the space change through collective use. Trust also develops through repetition. Students learn what adults will hold firmly, where choice is available, and how their actions affect others.

The setting allows several kinds of play to coexist. One group may build, while another may paint a sign, dismantle a pallet, sit inside a shelter, or talk while watching. Some students move quickly into the centre. Others remain at the edge until a material,

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person, or invitation offers a way in. A varied environment respects these different rhythms.

Acceptance is visible in what adults allow to remain. Half-built structures, crooked signs, and temporary worlds can look unfinished through an adult lens. For students, these traces hold memory and meaning. Keeping the space alive asks adults to tolerate some visual disorder while continuing to attend to access, hazards, and shared agreements.

Offer real materials and real responsibility.

Reclaimed timber, pallets, rope, tyres, paint and found objects can become many things. Hammers, saws, drills, impact drivers, sanders and measuring tools extend what is possible. Real tools communicate trust and bring real responsibility.

Early sessions include clear instruction in tool use, protective equipment, body positioning, material securing and storage. Facilitators check weather, materials, structures, first-aid readiness, and the site at the end of each session. These practices form the space's containing edge. Within that edge, students make meaningful decisions.

Timber resists. Screws heat. Structures wobble. Adults can quickly make these problems disappear by taking over. We have learned to pause and ask a question first: What are you noticing? How might you strengthen that? Who else will use this? This leaves the thinking with the young person while keeping adult care close at hand.

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This kind of play space is not about the finished building product; the value is in the process. A structure may remain crooked or be dismantled the following week.

The experience can still hold cooperation, persistence, humour, repair and the sense that an idea can take physical form.

Notice the Need before Responding to the Behaviour

Some students arrive with energy that seeks force, noise, repetition and impact. In a conventional setting, striking or breaking materials may be read quickly as aggression or damage. We began asking what this energy was communicating, what the students' bodies or minds might need, and how the environment could safely meet those needs.

A dedicated deconstruction area emerged, known informally as the "Smash Zone" or "Smashy Smashy Zone". Students could dismantle selected pallets, recover timber, remove nails, explore how materials were joined, and experience the bodily satisfaction of impact. Shared structures remained protected, and students feeling threatened by this energy could stay away. Tool expectations, personal space, and material checks still applied.

The zone helped adults hold two truths together. High-energy deconstruction can create hazards and affect others. It can also be purposeful play. With a clear place, suitable materials, and attentive adults, smashing could shift toward curiosity, resource

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recovery, and a new project. For some students, deconstruction was the doorway into deeper participation.

The kitchen and couch offered a similar lesson. Students who were often noticed for boundary-testing moments revealed another part of themselves when the environment shifted. Their play held domestic storytelling, humour and cooperation. The experience reminded us to track before teaching, and to look for needs before settling on a meaning for behaviour.

Practise Risk Together

The space is carefully held. Adults remove hazards that students cannot reasonably identify, set boundaries around tools and materials, and step in when the likely consequence exceeds what the group can manage. Some structures wobble and are intentionally left in place so students can assess the structures' safety and decide how to respond.

Students consider load, balance, fall space, sharp edges, hot fixings, rope loops, weather, heavy lifting, and the effect of their choices on others. A facilitator may move closer, ask a question, demonstrate a technique, or pause an activity. At another moment, the same facilitator may step back and allow a student to test and adjust.

This movement of proximity is part of the craft. When adults are anxious or rushed, they may stop play earlier. When they are grounded and attentive, they can read eyes, body position, speed, sound, skill, and group dynamics. Shared language about risk, hazard, play cues, and adult response helps a team act more consistently and with greater care.

Risk-benefit thinking supports this balance by weighing the value of a challenging activity against the likelihood and severity of harm (Brussoni et al., 2012). The aim is a setting where young people can practise judgment within a community that remains alert and responsive.

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Let Clothing Support Participation

Uniform became an unexpected part of play provision. Formal clothing and footwear can make climbing, kneeling, carrying timber, painting, digging or sitting on the ground uncomfortable. For girls wearing skirts, dresses or restrictive garments, movement may also carry concerns about exposure and social judgment.

At Guildford, access to sports uniforms on Self Build Play Space days signalled that bodies were expected to move, carry, build and get dusty. The change was practical and cultural.

The research base is still developing. An Australian cluster randomised trial identified impractical uniforms as a barrier to physical activity, particularly for girls. However, the one-day uniform change did not produce a significant increase in girls' moderate-to-vigorous activity (Nathan et al., 2021). A 2025 systematic review found that sports uniforms were generally associated with increased physical activity, playtime, and some fitness indicators, with particularly visible benefits for girls. Only five studies met its criteria, and the authors noted limitations in quality and consistency (Olivares-Arancibia et al., 2025).

For schools, the practical question is immediate: can students move comfortably and participate with dignity in the experiences being offered? Clothing, footwear, storage and acceptance of mess all shape the answer.

Build Belonging and Leave Room for Many Forms.

The Self Build Play Space provides Year 7 students with a visible way to contribute to the broader school culture. A sign, shelter, repaired structure or shared joke can remain for the next group. Other students may add to, alter, or dismantle it. The place becomes a record of participation and relationship.

A self-build space is one expression of adolescent play provision. Other schools may offer loose-parts areas, outdoor studios, digging and growing spaces, nature-rich retreats, maker areas that extend outdoors, or open ground where students can invent temporary uses. The deeper invitation is to provide more than one way to belong. Some

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young people seek speed and impact. Others seek a small enclosure, a conversation, a material to work with, or a place to watch before joining.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Guildford Grammar School experience has helped us see adolescence as a continuation of childhood with its own forms of play. Year 7 students may have greater physical capacity, sharper social awareness and a strong desire for independence. They also continue to imagine, make, test, retreat, laugh, take risks and build worlds together.

Their right to play is lived through relationships. It is shaped by the time schools protect, the places they make available, the types of materials they value and provide, the clothing students wear, the way adults interpret behaviour and the degree to which young people can influence decisions. A well-held play space combines freedom and care. Adults remain responsible, while young people experience real agency.

Secondary schools can begin with the following actions:

1. Recognise adolescents as children with a continuing right to play. Include Article 31 in whole-school conversations about wellbeing, break time, student voice and the design of the school day.
2. Protect regular and meaningful break time. Offer time free from academic demands, with opportunities for rest, friendship, movement, imagination and self-directed activity.
3. Create varied and adaptable places. Provide spaces for active, social, constructive, sensory, imaginative and quiet play, including materials young people can move and transform.
4. Listen to young people and share ownership. Invite students to shape the uses, agreements, materials and future development of their play spaces, and give their views genuine weight.
5. Use risk-benefit thinking. Remove unreasonable hazards while preserving age-appropriate challenge, uncertainty and opportunities to practise judgment.

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6. Prepare adults to notice before responding. Build shared language around play, behaviour, energy, risk, proximity and care so staff can step closer or further away with intention.
7. Review practical barriers to participation. Consider uniform, footwear, storage, mess, maintenance, accessibility, gender and cultural safety as part of play provision.
8. Make play part of the culture. Repeated access allows relationships, confidence, skills, shared memory, and a sense of belonging to grow.

Adolescents need adventure too. Our hope is that secondary schools will remain curious about what play looks like as children grow, and willing to create conditions where it can remain visible, accepted, and alive.

Note: At this time, classrooms with Year 7 students can access and use the space once per week. Daniel continues to work with school administration to increase access.

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Unheard Voices, Unseen Play: Addressing the Research Silence Around Disabled and Neurodivergent Children's Perspectives on Play

Sarah Jayne Meyer, MSc

Introduction

Play is a universal and essential part of childhood. It supports physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, and it is recognised as a fundamental right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989). Three articles are particularly relevant when considering disabled and neurodivergent children's participation in play research. Article 31 recognises the right of every child to rest, leisure, and play appropriate to their age. Article 23 affirms that a child with a disability has the right to live a full and decent life with dignity, independence, and active participation in their community. Article 12 states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings, and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have those views taken seriously.

Despite these protections, disabled and neurodivergent children often experience restricted access to play and limited opportunities to participate in research about their own lives.

The Problem with Current Play Research

Although Scotland has enshrined the UNCRC in law (Scottish Government, 2024), disabled and neurodivergent children's rights to play and research participation remain unevenly upheld. Systematic exclusion from research, especially research that claims to represent children's experiences of play, persists. This gap undermines children's rights, limits their opportunities for development, and perpetuates inequities in policy and practice. If the gap continues to be ignored, the opportunities of play for disabled and neurodivergent children will continue to diminish.

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Background and Context

The Importance of Play

Play is widely understood as the "work" of early childhood, providing a foundation for motor development, emotional regulation, spatial awareness, and executive functioning. As children grow older, however, play is often devalued and treated as a reward rather than a right.

For disabled and neurodivergent children, play is even more critical. Yet they are frequently excluded due to:

- fears of injury
- concerns about bullying
- misunderstandings about what their play looks like
- discomfort with behaviours that fall outside neurotypical norms

For example, authentic autistic play can differ significantly from neurotypical play, often leading to misinterpretation or exclusion when peers do not understand the "rules" or rhythms of autistic play (Guthrie Stirling, 2025). Adults, too, may inadvertently isolate autistic children when they do not recognise or value these differences.

Parents report significant barriers in public play spaces, including inadequate facilities, safety concerns, and fear of judgment (Scope UK, 2023). These barriers are particularly concerning given evidence linking play to reduced anxiety and improved mental health (Dodd et al., 2023), and the heightened mental health risks faced by disabled and neurodivergent children (Heslon et al., 2024). This reduced access to free and outdoor play can exacerbate existing inequalities for these children.

Are we Listening to All Children?

Despite growing interest in children's voices, disabled and neurodivergent children remain under-represented in research and, in particular, play research. Many studies rely heavily on adult proxies, even when claiming to foreground children's experiences. A large international study on disabled children's play, for example, presented "children's experiences" almost entirely through parents', teachers' and

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carers' accounts, with parents often asserting that their child could not communicate their preferences (Barron et al., 2007).

This reliance on adult interpretation reflects:

- deficit-based assumptions about communication
- methodological inflexibility
- the medical model of disability (Oliver, 1990)

Adult perspectives can complement children's accounts, but they cannot replace them, as their lived experiences differ profoundly. It also raises a fundamental question: Why do we assume adults can speak for disabled and neurodivergent children when we would not accept adults speaking for neurotypical children?

Research recruitment often, intentionally or not, favours children who are compliant, verbal, and easy to engage (Hackett et al., 2024). Schools may select "good" children to participate, while children who are dysregulated, non-verbal, or labelled "challenging" are excluded. Parents often act as gatekeepers by completing or not completing consent forms. These patterns disproportionately silence disabled and neurodivergent children.

The social model of disability offers a corrective: when tools and environments are adapted, disabled and neurodivergent children's perspectives can be captured with validity and reliability (Kramer et al., 2009).

Approaches and Strategies for Inclusive Research

Embracing the Messiness of Research with Children

Children are unpredictable. A talkative child may fall silent in an interview; carefully prepared activity sheets may become paper aeroplanes. Rather than resisting this unpredictability, researchers should embrace it. A paper aeroplane can serve as a tool, decorated with symbols, drawings, or words that answer the research question.

Flexibility is not a methodological weakness; it is a requirement for ethical, child-centred research.

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Allowing the Data, and the Child, to Lead

Ryu (2022) illustrates that children's priorities do not always align with researchers' assumptions about what is important. Through a critical inquiry of their own methodology, the researchers recognised that even with sustained reflexivity, moments of dissonance emerged between their interpretations and the perspectives of participating children. Yet it was precisely this reflexive, responsive stance that enabled the research to follow the children's lead, even when their interests diverged from the original study design. By allowing the data to guide the inquiry rather than adhering to predetermined researcher expectations, the study achieved genuinely child-led research.

Adapting Methods to the Child

The mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011) offers a flexible, multi-modal framework that enables children to participate in research without relying on reading or writing. By combining observations, interviews, and a range of participatory tools, the approach constructs a "mosaic" of children's perspectives, drawing on diverse forms of expression. Although originally developed for use with pre-school children, the Mosaic approach has since been successfully adapted for research with children who have disabilities and additional support needs, demonstrating its capacity to accommodate varied communication styles and developmental profiles. The use of photovoice and child-led tours is a common mosaic method, but illustrations, video diary rooms, and puppet shows are other data collection possibilities.

Inclusive research requires a diverse communication as well as methodological "toolbox," including but not limited to:

- Braille for blind or partially sighted children
- Makaton signing, Picture Exchange Communication System, or Augmented and Alternative Communication for non- or pre-verbal children
- Visual prompts, objects, or sensory materials
- Movement-based or play-based methods

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Listening to Silence

Listening to silence is as important as listening to speech. As Hackett et al. (2024) argue, researchers must attend to why children choose not to participate and resist the temptation to dismiss silence as irrelevant or "off-topic" during early analysis. Silence is a meaningful form of communication and may reflect not a child's choice, but the consequences of the researcher's actions, assumptions, or the dynamics of the research setting (Bucknall, 2014). During observations and focus groups, silence should be documented alongside body language, facial expressions, and the emotional tone of the interaction, whether the silence appears comfortable, hesitant, or resistant. Researchers should avoid prematurely filling silences; instead, children can be reassured that they may take their time. Flewitt (2005) suggests offering cards that allow children to indicate reasons for not answering, recognising that peer pressure, group dynamics, and disability-related barriers can all silence a child's voice. Some children may choose not to speak out to avoid standing out, to avoid contradicting dominant peers, or to avoid challenging group norms.

Silence is not only in the domain of verbal data collection, but it may also appear as skipped questions or patterned non-responses in surveys. Examining these patterns can provide insight into discomfort, misunderstanding, or disengagement. Focus groups, too, can inadvertently silence participants through intimidation, dominance by more vocal peers, or the desire to conform. Disabilities may also silence children, whether through non- or pre-verbal communication needs or through deliberate exclusion from participation. Recognising these dynamics is essential to ensuring that silence is interpreted as data, rather than absence, thereby deepening understanding and challenging assumptions about who is "able" to participate.

Accepting Discomfort

Inclusive research is time-consuming and analytically complex. It requires researchers to sit with ambiguity, adapt methods, and challenge their own assumptions. But discomfort does not justify exclusion. If we are committed to hearing all children's voices, we must be willing to step outside our comfort boundaries. This includes embracing the analytical challenges that arise when working with diverse forms of data,

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drawings, gestures, silence, movement, digital artefacts, or co-created objects. Each mode demands different interpretive lenses and often resists neat categorisation.

Some researchers have found value in physically engaging with data to deepen immersion. For example, Smith (2014) cut out speech bubbles with data printed on them to organise and reorganise topics during analysis, demonstrating how tactile methods can support memory, thematic mapping, and the handling of overlapping ideas. Approaches like this highlight the importance of working with data in ways that honour its form rather than forcing it into conventional analytic structures. Researchers must therefore navigate contradictions, partial narratives, and fragmented insights, recognising that complexity is inherent to authentic child-centred research. Accepting this discomfort is essential to producing analysis that reflects the richness of children's lived experiences rather than simplifying them to fit traditional methodological expectations.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Ensuring that disabled and neurodivergent children are meaningfully included in play research requires a coordinated commitment across research, education, and policy. The evidence presented demonstrates that exclusion is rarely the result of children's abilities and far more often a consequence of structural, methodological, and attitudinal barriers. Addressing these barriers demands a shift toward research practices that are flexible, reflexive, and grounded in children's rights.

Researchers must adopt approaches that recognise the diversity of children's communication styles and lived experiences. This includes developing multi-modal, child-centred methodologies that allow children to express themselves in ways that feel natural and accessible to them. A robust methodological "toolbox" should incorporate visual, sensory and alternative communication systems, ensuring that participation is not limited to those who can engage verbally or in writing. Researchers also need to cultivate a reflexive stance, one that acknowledges the power dynamics inherent in research and remains open to following children's priorities, even when they diverge from initial research plans. Silence, hesitation, and non-verbal communication must be

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treated as meaningful data rather than absence, and researchers should be prepared to invest the time and interpretive care required to understand these forms of expression.

Schools and educators also play a critical role in ensuring that all children, not only those who are compliant, confident, or easy to engage, are offered opportunities to participate in research. This includes actively challenging cultures that reward "good behaviour" with participation and inadvertently silence children who are dysregulated, anxious, or misunderstood.

Policymakers, too, have a responsibility to embed all children's voices within the systems that shape their lives. This involves funding accessible play spaces, supporting inclusive research initiatives, and ensuring that policy development processes actively seek out and respond to the perspectives of disabled and neurodivergent children. Compliance with UNCRC Articles 12, 23, and 31 must be monitored and applied in practice, not simply acknowledged in principle.

Ultimately, the inclusion of disabled and neurodivergent children in play research is not a methodological preference but a rights-based imperative. When children's voices are excluded, whether through inaccessible methods, adult assumptions, or structural barriers, the resulting policies and practices fail to reflect their lived realities. By committing to inclusive, adaptive, and ethically grounded research practices, we can begin to close the gap between rights and reality. Listening to disabled and neurodivergent children directly, respectfully, and on their own terms is essential for creating environments in which every child can play, participate, and thrive.

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The Power of Outdoor Play Partnerships for Inclusion and Accessibility

Angela Rekers, PhD

Introduction

Playing outdoors across a variety of terrains has been shown to contribute to children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development and well-being (Fyfe-Johnson et al., 2021; Schutte et al., 2017). While research clearly shows the benefits of outdoor play across a variety of terrains, children also have fewer opportunities for outdoor physical activity (WHO, 2019). This trend is wide-ranging, affecting children of all ages and abilities across all demographics.

Contributing to these trends are increasingly sedentary lifestyles and adults' concerns about safety that are limiting opportunities for outdoor play (Gray et al., 2015); even in educational settings, children and young people (CYP) are afforded fewer opportunities to move, play, and explore (Jerebine et al., 2022). Affordances for independent and/or risky play are likely to be especially constrained for young people and children with additional needs (Gately et. al., 2023). Given the well-documented research on the multiple holistic benefits of such play, these constraints may contribute to developmental challenges across physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains.

This paper argues that collaboration and partnership among families, communities, not-for-profit organizations, playworkers, forest school leaders, schools, specialist therapists, and others can create intentional opportunities to promote and support outdoor play for children and young people, especially those with traditionally limited access. Specialist services typically include health-sciences therapists, such as occupational therapists. Introducing outdoor play specialists could benefit everyone. An outdoor play collaboration in Wales, United Kingdom (UK), is used here to demonstrate the benefits of a forest school program for youth with disabilities.

Issues

Parents/carers, teachers, and specialist practitioners, such as occupational therapists, who value the right to play for *every* child and young person, as argued in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (IPA, 2026;

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UNCRC, 2013), may find their intentions frustrated by institutional expectations and daily demands. Children's play repertoires at school are often limited to adult-chosen, adult-initiated, and adult-motivated opportunities for meeting measurable 'learning and development' milestones. While play-based activities may support these milestones, schools and therapeutic settings often provide too few play opportunities defined as 'freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, and personally directed' (PPSG, 2015). While recess allows children to play with fewer adult-initiated demands, the beneficial, available affordances (Gibson, 1979/2025), or social and physical opportunities, of the schoolyard may be limited for diverse children (Balesley et al., 2013); they are often non-existent for secondary school-aged young people.

Furthermore, inclusive playgrounds and spaces may still perpetuate a 'deficit' perspective of children and young people with diverse abilities, thus limiting the types of social and material interactions. Play is shaped not only by sets of affordances, in which the capabilities and intentions of the individual meet their social and material environment (Gibson 1979/2015), but also by sociocultural mediating forces, such as policy, playground design, the curriculum and timetable, teachers' skills, etc. As children's play opportunities decline outside school hours, perhaps it is time to make room for more un*adult*erated outdoor play during the school week through collaborative play partnerships.

Background

Lack of confidence and safety fears are often cited as barriers to facilitating outdoor play, and these concerns are well founded. Referring to the interactivity between the individual as perceiver, their capabilities, and the properties of that which they encounter, be they social or material, Gibson (1979/2015) stressed that affordances may be beneficial or harmful, offering 'benefit or injury, life or death' (p. 134). For teachers to suddenly become playworkers or for specialist therapists to add outdoor risk assessments to their daily tasks may not be realistic.

There is a need, therefore, to highlight the importance of a collaborative 'third space', on or off school grounds, in which children, young people, teaching staff and specialist practitioners can be supported by trained forest school or outdoor play leaders

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to access the benefits of joint playfulness offered by an alternative or more 'wild' pedagogy. Trained outdoor practitioners have the perception, capabilities, and resources to provide safe, inclusive outdoor play opportunities tailored to each client group and every individual within it. Such a space gives children and young people the opportunity to make independent play choices and engage in risky play, which is often denied to those with diverse abilities (Morgenthaler et al., 2023). Essentially, for practitioners, third space partnerships can provide both formal and informal opportunities for teachers and specialist practitioners to observe, learn from, and respond to children and young people's play; reap the benefits of being outdoors themselves; and even join in as a 'play partner' to shed typical school-based adult/child power hierarchies (Rekers & McCree, 2022).

In the United Kingdom, outdoor play is often facilitated by forest school programs delivered off-site in local woodlands or parks; these programs are run by independent forest school practitioners external to the school or education association staff, although school staff also attend. Rather than being limited to early childhood provision or private nature preschools, forest school programs are delivered to a wide range of beneficiaries through long-term, weekly sessions (see FSA, 2011/2026). Children, young people, and adults with additional needs, or in special circumstances with organizational support, such as a self-contained special needs classroom or a women's domestic violence or refugee support non-profit organization, are often able to access forest school provision through grant funding. This equitable access for a range of beneficiaries is even more sustainable when practitioners and teaching staff complete their own forest school training and develop confidence in working with their groups outside.

Much of the grant funding is possible due to the commitment of governmental legislation and policies, such as those of the Welsh Government (WG), underpinned by the country's adoption in 2004 of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as the foundation for policymaking in relation to children and young people (WG, 2022). Subsequent legislation, such as the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 and the Social Services and Well-being Act (Wales) 2015, highlights the value of play opportunities for mental and physical health and encourages outdoor activity

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across the health, social, education, and childcare sectors. Indeed, the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 includes mandates for Local Authorities to provide diverse play opportunities for children of all ages and abilities; and, The Play Sufficiency Assessment (Wales) Regulations 2012 outlines statutory guidance that includes safeguarding, developing a play workforce, equitable access, types of physical spaces, and community engagement, overseen by the Ministerial Review of Play Implementation Board (PRIB).

In this paper, I refer to forest school sessions delivered by a not-for-profit forest school charity that has been running short- and long-term programs across South Wales since 2001; its funding streams have relied primarily on Wales' commitment to outdoor play and to mitigating the impact of multiple disadvantages, such as poverty and disability.

An Environmental Affordance Perspective Approach to Analyzing Play

The benefits of forest school provision, funded and delivered outside the school environment, supports play opportunities for children and young people with additional needs (Friedman, et al., 2022) School-based provision is often focused on 'normative' interventions; forest school and outdoor play can provide a 'lower -demand environment', which can widen the range of affordances for children's social interactions as well as their interactions with materials (Friedman et al., 2022). Studies show that the features and resources of outdoor play settings matter, as do play partners and adult facilitation in such play spaces (Rekers, 2026; Rekers & McCree, 2026; Waters, 2017). An environmental affordance perspective can be used to consider these physical, material, and social influences on outdoor play (Bang, 2009; Rekers, 2026). This perspective layers cultural historical activity theory with affordance theory to analyze children's interactions with what they encounter and with whom they interact in everyday activities and settings. It highlights material and social affordances that are available, promoted, and constrained, as well as the child/young person's individual motive orientation and agency in responding to perceived affordances.

> Perceiving is an individual achievement… It is keeping in touch with the world, an experiencing of things rather than a having of experiences. It involves

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> awareness-of instead of just awareness…The continuous act of perceiving involves the co-perceiving of the self (Gibson, 1979/2015, pp. 228-229).

An environmental affordance perspective uses Bang's (2009) analysis of children's activity in everyday settings according to the affordances of features, materials, and artifacts or *things*; affordances of social others; and affordances of self-experience:

Affordances of Things – what is available & utilized, when & why, how that contributes to the ongoing activities, the child's participation & experience

Affordances of Social Others – the child learns about 'who am I?' in relation to social others & expectations in the setting. Comes to know what is important in different activity settings. How to be an individual within a collective experience.

Affordances of Self-Experience – the child experiences their agency (first-person perspective) as well as possible/available cultural positions (third- person perspective), *phenomenological double-ness of participation: 'Who am I /Who am I becoming? Is this valued? Do I value this?'*

From this perspective, consider the following forest school session delivered off school grounds in which young people with additional needs participate:

> Along with a teacher and paraeducator, eight 14- and 15-year-olds from a specialist autism school attend Forest School weekly throughout the school year. The bus drops them at the nature reserve car park, where two Forest School leaders meet them; together they walk 1/8 mile to the Forest School site. The young people are not rushed, and there are many things to observe along the way, including a pond with tadpoles.
>
> When the path opens into a grassy clearing, the group has to cross to reach the wooded Forest School site; one 14-year-old boy, John, starts to walk-run, racing to the site. As he moves quickly over the uneven ground, John often falls but laughs, gets back up, and keeps rushing. One of the teachers says to a Forest School leader: 'His mother was telling us how much he loves Forest School and talks about it all the time. He never really gets the opportunity to be off

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> pavement, so we were worried. He has to use a walker a lot at school. However, here he cannot wait to run and race everyone! Luckily, this field is a soft landing spot!'

The affordances of the uneven but soft ground provide opportunities for running and racing, as well as for falling; and the affordances of the teaching and forest school staff, as well as peers, provide opportunities for safeguarding, risk assessment, cheering, racing, and beating in a race. The affordances of self-experience, therefore, include being-watched-able, being-running-able, being-falling-able, being-getting-up-able, being-raced-able, being-winning-able…

When John gets to the site, the usual adult-facilitated 'circle time' begins, where the leaders settle the students and remind them of the rules: "take care of yourself, take care of each other, take care with the woods and its creatures". They ask if the young people want to play a game together first, and they choose to play '1, 2, 3, where are you?', a hide-and-seek game that reinforces the boundaries and lets them explore beyond the basecamp area. The young people hiding first cover themselves with a camouflage tarp down a path behind alder trees, giggling and shushing each other. The 'finders' group shouts, '1, 2, 3, where are you?' Those hiding shout, "1, 2, 3, we are over here!" and peek out from underneath their shelter. There is much shrieking when the hiders are found.

The affordances of hiding, finding, giggling, and being 'good-scared' are less likely in a classroom or even playground setting for this group of young people. Because so many adults are there to support the students and each other, they can monitor for safety and join in as play partners.

After this game, the students choose from activities that are facilitated and/or supported by the leaders, such as sawing wood for the fire, using loppers to cut bracken, lying or crawling in a net hammock, making a hazel-branch fence, cooking breakfast over the fire, doing craft activities, swinging, working on the den they add to each week, hiding woodland puppets from each other in a puppet hide and seek game, or just hanging out drinking hot chocolate observing their classmates and chatting to adults. John and his best friend seem to like climbing trees best of all. The forest school site is

enclosed on two sides by an ancient hedge created by previously coppiced trees, along with oak and ash trees. These, along with built-up soil, provide a 'natural' berm that enables the boys to climb up and into the trees. They spend hours here, dragging tarps up to make a den, having their snack in its shelter, throwing acorns and mouse-nibbled hazelnut shells.

Using an environmental affordance perspective to analyze tree-climbing activity, for example, highlights the tree's actualized affordances: climbing, crawling, watching from a height, balancing, resting, etc. The social affordances John takes up include watching, sharing, helping, and hanging out. Harmful affordances, such as falling from height, are present; however, adults' presence and the natural features of the horizontal tree limbs mitigate them, and the boys have discovered that these features afford the perfect challenge. They have self-selected this spot for tree climbing as they have perceived its affordances in relation to their intentions and capabilities. Therefore, the affordances for self-experience include: being both watched- and watchable, being both helped-able and helping-able, being tree-climbing-able, being making-independent-choices-able, among others.

These affordances are shaped by collaboration among teaching staff, forest school leaders, forest school site features, and the young people's choices. They offer opportunities to see which activities motivate the children, as well as to show how they can self-define their capabilities. Adding specialist staff, such as occupational therapists, who work with young people at school would provide a more natural, student-motivated field of experience in which specialists can deliver supportive interventions.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

For children and young people with diverse abilities in particular, an interdisciplinary approach to outdoor play provision can provide multiple benefits, including an enhanced sense of competence and ability. Chawla and Heft (2002) argue that the physical and social affordances available to children contribute to their development of competencies. Because over 22 percent of occupational therapists (OTs) in the United States work in early intervention centers or schools (AOTA, 2023), multidisciplinary partnerships and collaborations are commonplace indoors. Expanding

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this provision outdoors may provide additional benefits for adults, children, and young people. Adding nature therapists, play workers, or forest school leaders would ensure that children and young people with additional needs who may not be able to access play opportunities without added support can engage with a wider range of outdoor affordances.

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How Parents Can Advocate for a Playful Childhood that Prioritizes Joy

Linnea Westerlind, MSocSc

Introduction

Parents and caregivers, we are raising kids in a challenging era. With rapidly changing, addictive technologies competing for our children's time—and let's be honest, our own time, too—it's never been harder to ensure kids get enough physical activity and time outdoors.

The good news is that, despite modern challenges, kids are still wired to play because play is biological and instinctive. As parents and caregivers, we can influence our children's access to play in nearly every area of their lives.

We know play is essential to a healthy and happy childhood. By sharing strategies and ideas for cultivating a culture of play within our families and communities, we can advocate for a playful childhood that prioritizes joy.

Problem Statement

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2025), school-age kids need at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day, and preschoolers need even more. In reality, most kids don't meet those minimums (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2023).

Recess gives kids a chance to socialize, play, and be physically active during the school day. Unfortunately, American children get less recess than previous generations and much less than children in countries like Finland, Uganda, and Japan (Jarrett, 2019).

While sports are another good opportunity for play, today's youth are increasingly being funneled into select and travel teams, which are expensive and highly competitive. This has also exacerbated disparities between children from wealthier families, who can afford these programs, and those from families who cannot (Project Play, 2025). An Aspen Institute study found that 22% of parents believe their child will play at the college level, and 11% believe their child could go pro (Dorsch & Blazo, 2025).

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This unrealistic viewpoint and the focus on extreme achievement and competition in sports cause us to lose sight of sports' purpose.

Background

Today's children also spend more time on screens and, consequently, less time being physically active and engaged in play than any previous generation (American College of Pediatricians, 2025; Guthold et al., 2020).

Not all parents and caregivers have the time or bandwidth to do advocacy work, and access to play has societal complexities that are inequitable and not easily solved.

Appropriate Strategies

Here are some suggestions for how parents and caregivers can advocate for and prioritize play in their children's lives.

Play in Schools

Kids spend a significant portion of their waking hours at school, so the quality and quantity of play at school is an important piece of the play puzzle. How much recess time does your child receive if they are in elementary school? Ask their teacher for the daily schedule and check the number of recess breaks and the total minutes. If recess is lacking at your child's school, talk to the teacher and principal about the importance of recess for your child's physical, mental, and social health. Many states mandate minimum recess times to ensure kids have access to this essential time for play (The Sports Institute, n.d.). Find out whether your state has a recess mandate and whether your child's school is following it.

Are the outdoor spaces at your child's school "green" with trees, native plants, and natural elements available for play? If you have capacity, get involved with your school's PTA and volunteer to help fundraise for a greener schoolyard environment. Schoolyards with green elements promote health, wellbeing, and learning (Stevenson et al., 2020).

Middle and high school kids also need time for movement. Does your child's school offer breaks beyond just passing periods? Do they provide a variety of Physical

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Education classes? Are there non-competitive club sports available? You can talk to other parents and advocate together for changes that benefit your tweens and teens.

Play in Sports

High-quality sports programs with trained coaches can bolster academic engagement, promote resilience, and support mental and physical health (*Bengtsson et al., 2025*). Sports are also a great way for kids to play throughout childhood and adolescence. Most kids want to play sports because they are fun and they can spend time with friends. Parents and caregivers can encourage their kids to avoid early specialization, which can lead to overuse injuries and burnout, and to prioritize fun (Luo et al., 2025). Let kids play a wide variety of sports and try new ones.

Play in Parks

Our local parks are an excellent place to engage in outdoor play. Return regularly to a favorite park to become intimately familiar with every nook and cranny or find a new one each time to explore. Let your child lead and catch yourself before you say, "be careful" or "don't get dirty." Kids need to find and test their own limits, so don't hold them back from climbing a tree (to a reasonable height) or getting their feet muddy in the stream.

You can also help shape your community's parks. Attend info sessions and give feedback on new parks or the redevelopment of parks in your neighborhood. Advocate for park elements that encourage play—climbing features, skate elements, and child- and teen-friendly spaces. Skateboarding is not a criminal activity; it's a sport.

Playful Community Organizations

Organizations like the YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, and local parks and recreation programs are hubs of active play. Look for after-school and summer camp opportunities that prioritize physical activity and outdoor time over screens and technology. Some organizations offer sports sampling camps where kids can try a wide variety of sports. If you can, support these organizations financially or with your volunteer time so they can keep thriving.

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Playful Family Time

This is the most important area—parents have more control over how their kids spend their time at home than anywhere else. We have the chance to sculpt this period of their lives, so let's make it playful and joyful! There are lots of free and easy ways to spend time together.

Close to home, you can watch the sunset from the tallest hill you can find in your neighborhood. Lie on your backs and look at the clouds. On a cloud-free night, watch the stars come out together. Make s'mores in the microwave and go for an evening flashlight walk. Great family games and activities that require minimal equipment include kickball, bocce ball, pickleball, hide-and-seek, and hula hooping.

Exploring further afield, hiking is inexpensive and encourages a sense of adventure and discovery. Bring hot cocoa for a mid-hike treat. Listen for bird calls or look for signs of insects. Give your child the unforgettable experience of an overnight in nature. If you're new to camping, try a state park close to home and ask other parents for tips and advice. To save money on gear, check used kids' clothing stores, online trading networks, and swapping with other families.

And, parents, let's rethink screens. They are unavoidable in children's and teens' lives today, but you can set clear boundaries and model healthy habits. Aim to have screen-free time as a family every day. Assure yourself that it's OK for kids to be bored. Resist the urge to offer a screen every time your child complains. Young kids who use screens in their stroller during a walk miss the chance to see and absorb the surrounding nature.

Conclusion

Parents across the U.S. are advocating for systemic change in recess policies, youth sports oversight, and physical activity legislation. More than 20 U.S. states now have physical activity and recess laws in place, often thanks to parent advocacy (*U.W. Sports Institute | Youth sports and physical activity legislation tracker*, n.d.). You can start locally by getting involved with your school's PTA and joining its legislative advocacy committee. Find organizations in your region that are doing systems change

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work and get involved. Contact your state legislators and ask for a meeting; talk about what matters to you regarding play, even if you do not know the policy solution.

Parents *can* and *do* make a difference in bolstering play in their own child's life—and in creating societal changes that benefit all kids.

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